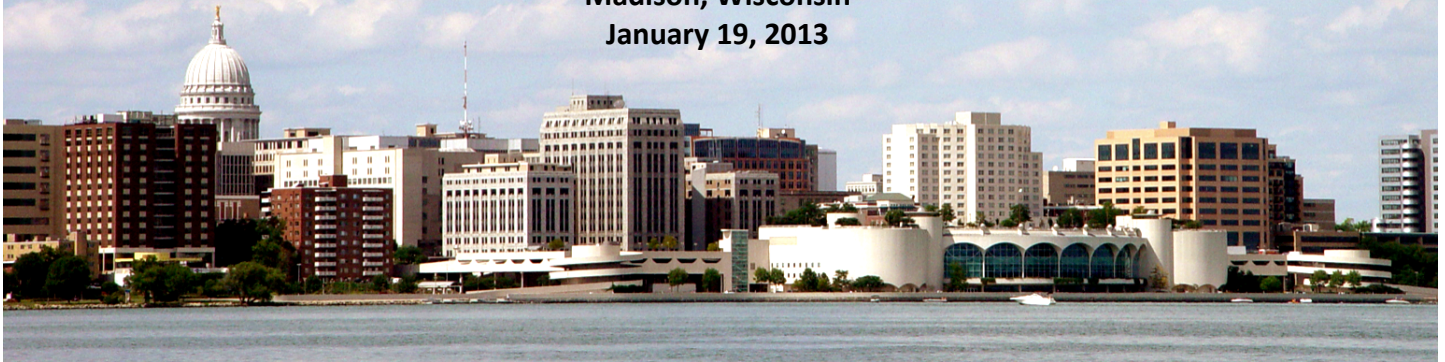


# ***“Antioch: Church Gone Viral”***

**ACTS 11:19-30**

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Most of us know that when something gets passed around on the Internet millions of times in just a few days, we say that it has “gone viral.” And of course, that saying goes back to the way a virus will replicate itself over and over in just a sort amount of time. One of the first videos to go viral was the “Dancing Baby” back in 1996. Some of you might remember this, an animated GIF of a baby dancing. Early on, the Dancing Baby made an appearance on Ally McBeal, the animation very quickly became popular, it got passed around, and became one of the first truly “viral videos.” In more recent times, we think of the “Annoying Orange” videos, going back to 2009, the original “Harlem Shake” video released in 2012 and reaching 1 billion views on YouTube within its first 40 days. We think of “Gangnam Style” by PSY, released in the summer of 2013, also reaching 1 billion views very quickly, within just a few months of its release on YouTube.

This past week, I know some of you have seen the latest video to go viral, the “Devil Baby” prank from New York City, a video where a creepy-looking baby jumps up in its stroller and scares people on the streets of New York. The prank is a promo for a show on television, the video was released just a few days ago, I checked yesterday, and it is already up to more than 32 million views on YouTube.

What all of these videos have in common is that they were shared from one person to another on the Internet, and the growth of each one has almost taken on a life of its own. They have truly “gone viral.” Like a virus, like the flu, one person shares a link with several others, who then share with several others, and in just a short amount of time, the concept spreads very quickly. With this in mind, this morning I would like for us to study a church that went viral, a New Testament congregation that grew by leaps and bounds. I am referring to the church in the ancient city of Antioch, and the first reference to the church in that city is found in Acts 11 (p. 1722) – Acts 11:19-30.

I would point out that there are actually two Antiochs mentioned in the Bible – there is Antioch of Pisidia, a small town in Asia Minor where Paul stopped very briefly on one of his missionary journeys. But the Antioch we are studying this morning is sometimes known as Antioch of Syria, a large city located roughly 300 miles directly north of the city of Jerusalem. As you can see, I put Jerusalem and Antioch into Google Maps yesterday, and no matter how hard I tried, it would not let me travel directly from one city to the other! You will notice that ancient Antioch is just a few miles straight west of Aleppo, Syria. Syria, of course, is in the middle of a horrible civil war. Then, south of Antioch, you run into Lebanon, and then Israel. As most of us know, not everyone in that part of the world is on speaking terms right now! So, no matter where I dragged

the little guide points on the map, Google was basically saying, “You really do not want to travel between Antioch and Jerusalem!” Instead, as you can see, the map kept directing me to make that trip through Syria and Iraq and Egypt! So, apparently, traveling more than 2000 miles out of the way (through Iraq) is much safer than making the journey directly from Antioch to Jerusalem. I was able to find, though, that “as the crow flies,” the distance between the two cities is roughly 310 miles.

Many people do not realize that Antioch of Syria was actually the third largest city in the Roman Empire (Rome was the largest, and Alexandria, Egypt, was the second largest). The population estimates vary, but historians tell us that the population of ancient Antioch was somewhere between 500-800,000 people. It was a huge city and perhaps very roughly the size of Milwaukee or Nashville. The population of Antioch was diverse. It was on a major trade route between Rome and Asia and India, and residents ranged from retired Roman army officers, to merchants, to sailors, and we also know that there were many Jews. In fact, the Jewish population was so strong, Antioch was one of very few cities in the ancient world that had a Greek-speaking synagogue – that was very rare.

Archaeologists tell us that the architecture in Antioch was amazing. Antioch is where the Greek and Roman civilizations had merged. They tell us that the main street was at least four miles long and was paved with marble. Not only that, but the street was lit up at night, and the sidewalk was covered. So, people could go shopping downtown without getting out in the weather. So, if we could imagine a marble sidewalk, covered, and lit up at night starting right here and going all the way down to the capitol building here in Madison, we would have some idea of how advanced Antioch really was. I mean, we don’t even have covered sidewalks here in Madison! And then, on top of this, we are also told that the city had running water, thanks to a Roman aqueduct bring water in from the mountains.

We also know that the city was surrounded by a huge wall. On the wall back here is a picture of Tyche (or Fortune), the patron goddess of Antioch. The statue is now on display at the Vatican Museum in Rome. You might notice that she is standing on a guy representing the main river that runs through Antioch, and (I don’t know whether you can see this), but if you look at her head, you will see that she is wearing a replica of the city wall! The wall was up to 60 feet high in some places, and it was wide enough so that two chariots could pass each other side-by-side when riding on top of the wall. They were proud of their wall. So you can see that Antioch of Syria was a major city in the ancient world.

But as amazing and as advanced as Antioch might have been, our interest this morning is with the church, an ancient congregation that spread and multiplied very quickly, almost like a virus. It was this huge, diverse, advanced, strategic, and fortified city that faithful Christians went to with the gospel message very early on in the history of the Christian faith. As the early Christians ran for their lives due to the persecution that was taking place in Jerusalem, they ran in all directions, and as they ran 300 miles straight north, this is where we pick up in Acts 11:19-30,

***So then those who were scattered because of the persecution that occurred in connection with Stephen made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except to Jews alone. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and began speaking to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord. The news about them reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas off to Antioch. Then when he arrived and witnessed the grace of God, he rejoiced and began to encourage them all with resolute heart to remain true to the Lord; for he was a good man,***

***and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And considerable numbers were brought to the Lord. And he left for Tarsus to look for Saul; and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. And for an entire year they met with the church and taught considerable numbers; and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch. Now at this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them named Agabus stood up and began to indicate by the Spirit that there would certainly be a great famine all over the world. And this took place in the reign of Claudius. And in the proportion that any of the disciples had means, each of them determined to send a contribution for the relief of the brethren living in Judea. And this they did, sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the elders.***

As we find here, then, the church in Antioch grew quickly. This morning, therefore, I want us to look at what they did, so that we can imitate their behavior. Why was the church in Antioch so successful as a congregation? I would like for us to keep our Bibles open to this passage as we study the characteristics of this congregation that made it grow so quickly. What was it that allowed the word of God to spread so quickly from one person to another?

- I. **And as we look at this paragraph, I would point out first of all that these people ENDURED PERSECUTION.**

In other words, these people were serious enough about their Christian faith to not give up...for anything! We notice in verse 19 that these people ***“were scattered because of the persecution that occurred in connection with Stephen.”*** You might remember that Saul, who later converted and had his name changed to Paul, this man (starting in the opening verses of Acts 8) was emboldened by the death of Stephen and started chasing Christians down, all over the regions of Judea and Samaria. In fact, the Bible tells us in Acts 8:1 that ***“all”*** of the disciples were scattered ***“except for the apostles.”*** In other words, the apostles stayed put. The apostles hunkered down and hid in Jerusalem for a time, but everybody else pretty much ran for their lives, and several apparently fled north to the city of Antioch.

Right at that moment, the situation with the church looked rather bleak. It didn't look good. The leaders were in hiding, and all of the members scattered in all directions. We learn in Acts 11:19, though, that as these people were on the run, they took the gospel with them, and the church spread like wildfire. We think of the big fire out in the Los Angeles area over the past few days. My understanding is that that fire started when several men started a campfire and the wind picked up just a few of those embers. As of yesterday afternoon, there were 1100 firefighters working to contain that fire. That is what happened to the early church. Saul came in and tried to sweep out the early Christians, but in doing so, he merely spread the embers, and that is when the church really started to grow. I don't know if you have thought about this, but it appears that Paul is now responsible for much of the growth of the early church, even before he obeyed the gospel – not as a preacher, but as a persecutor!

And there is a good lesson for us here: When we face pressure for holding to our Christian faith, it is very important that we endure it. We are not to give in to the pressure to compromise what we believe. This past Wednesday, I told you about some intense pressure that was placed on my wife to miss the Wednesday evening assembly. That decision has already cost our family multiple thousands of dollars in lost wages, the expense of holding firm on that decision will continue for some time, but certain things are not negotiable.

A month or so ago, I gave you an article about a judge from the state of Washington who is part of a team of other judges. As you know, same sex marriages were just approved out there, and this judge (a Christian, an

elder in the Lord's church), very quietly sent a memo to his fellow judges asking them to step in for him and take his place if he were ever called upon to officiate a gay wedding. The other judges agreed, but that arrangement was leaked to the media, and suddenly this man is portrayed as being full of hate. Gay rights groups filed a complaint, the court conducted an investigation, and although the court investigator concluded that the judge had done nothing wrong, the investigation did conclude that there was an "appearance of fairness issue." To resolve the issue, the judge has now agreed to simply refrain from doing any weddings at all. So here he is as a respected member of the community, a moral and upright man serving on the superior court of Thurston County, Washington, but due to persecution he is no longer being allowed to perform a certain aspect of his job – persecution. But thankfully, he stayed strong on that. We are seeing it all around the nation: More and more often, those who hold to a Christian point of view are getting pressured. Christian bakers and photographers are now facing pressure and have even been forced by the courts to use their artistic and creative abilities to help celebrate gay weddings. Several have decided to close up shop under pressure from the government rather than use their talents to help celebrate something that they consider to be immoral. We have faced pressure here at Four Lakes when our congregation was threatened with a lawsuit by the Freedom From Religion Foundation because our church rented part of a public school as a place to worship. As our culture continues to slide more and more toward the secular, we will face more and more of this. But we learn from the church in Antioch: One reason that congregation grew is because they endured persecution. They did not give up, they were not quitters, but they held on to the Christian faith, even in the face of some intense pressure.

**II. There is a something else these people did that caused them grow as a congregation, and that is: EVERY MEMBER OPENLY TALKED ABOUT THE WORD OF GOD IN THEIR EVERYDAY LIVES.**

In verse 19, as these people made their way to Antioch, they were speaking the word of God – first, to the Jews – and then (in verse 20), they began speaking to the Greeks as well. And I would point out, the word translated here as "*speaking,*" does not refer to "giving a speech." Instead, the word refers to any kind of talking, the kind of talking that we would do with a friend, the kind of conversation we might have with a neighbor or with the guy we run into at the Post Office – normal, everyday conversation. And in these conversations, we find that they spoke the word of God, they spoke about the Lord Jesus. Can we imagine what those conversations must have been like? These people left their homes, they left their jobs, they left their families – all because of their faith in Jesus Christ – and when they got to where they were going, the Bible tells us that they kept on talking about the Lord.

We think about our lives here in Madison. We are certainly not on the run or anything, but do we find ourselves talking about the Lord in our everyday conversations? You know what I find so interesting sometimes? Some things are very easy for us to talk about. If we find a good restaurant, we tend to mention it in our everyday conversations, "Hey, we just found a great new Mexican restaurant over on Midvale Boulevard!" Or, "Hey, we just had some great seafood at this new buffet place off of Lein Road." And when it comes to food, we could go on and on. But do we have that same enthusiasm about things that really matter? Let's say we go to the nicest restaurant in Madison: How long does that meal satisfy? How long until we are hungry again? At the most, maybe 5-6 hours. Food is so temporary, and yet eternity is forever. How much more, then, should we always be speaking and conversing about the word of God! We remember what the Lord himself said in Mark 8:38, "*For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels.*" It is easy to talk about food, and sports, and politics, and the weather, but let us make sure that we are not ashamed to speak as the Christians in Antioch were speaking. Today, we can pass along a business card offering the Bible correspondence courses that are offered by this congregation. We can use the Post-It

notes. We can direct somebody to the website. We can leave a brochure in the break room at work. We can offer to sit down and study the Bible with a friend. We can bring somebody with us to a Bible class. We can keep a Bible on our desk. We can offer to pray for a friend or a neighbor. We can take the time to care and to talk. We learn, then, that the Christians in Antioch conversed about the word of God. They spoke of Jesus in their everyday conversations, and this is certainly something that contributed to them “going viral” as a congregation.

**III. There is a third quality that made this church stand out, and that is: THROUGH RIGHTEOUS LIVING, GOD’S GRACE WAS ON DISPLAY FOR THE WORLD TO SEE.**

Notice what happens in verse 23: When Barnabas shows up to see how things are going, Barnabas “*witnessed the grace of God.*” Now usually, we don’t think of grace as something we can see, and yet it says here that Barnabas saw it. Barnabas saw God’s grace. As I see it, this goes back to what we studied several weeks ago from Ephesians 2. At one point we were dead in our sins, we were disobedient to God’s law, we were enslaved to selfishness, and we were lost in that condition. However, because of God’s grace, we were made alive, we were raised up with Christ in baptism, we were saved by grace through faith, and we were made for the purpose of doing good works. And that is something that people can see. People can see the change that takes place in our lives. People can see the “before” and “after” picture. It is not something we make a point of showing off to the world, but when we commit our lives to living like Jesus, it shows. Several years ago, a fellow preacher challenged the audience to go out and “BE JESUS” to somebody today. That is what we are talking about here. When we focus our lives on doing what Jesus would do, our close friends have a way of noticing. God’s grace becomes something others can see, and Barnabas saw it in Antioch.

**IV. In that same verse (verse 23), notice something else about this congregation: In verse 23, we find that Barnabas encouraged them all with resolute heart to REMAIN TRUE TO THE LORD.**

It wasn’t a matter of these people obeying the gospel and then thinking they had fulfilled their mission in life. Instead, once they turned to the Lord, they had to focus with every ounce of their being to “*remain true to the Lord.*” When we are baptized, we are buried with Christ, we are clothed with Christ, we are in Christ, but once we are in Christ, we need to focus intently on staying there! Nobody has the power to take us away from the Lord; however, we do have the ability to wander. We have the ability to drift. We remember what the Lord said in Luke 9:62, “*No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.*” Once we put our hand on the plow, our job is to remain true to the Lord, our job is to keep our eyes on Jesus. I think of the roto-tiller my dad taught me to use when I was maybe 10 or 11 years old. It had no transmission of any kind – no control whatsoever – you had to tip it up to get the tines off the ground to get it started, and then you had to hold on for dear life. I remember dad saying, “Hold on tight, because if you let go, we may never see that roto-tiller again.” That is what we are talking about here. Once we start the Christian faith, we need to hold on tight and not look back. We need to focus.

In practical terms, this means we need to pray, we need to read the word of God on a daily basis, and we need to lean on our brothers and sisters for support and encouragement. In fact, if we skip down to verse 26, we find that Barnabas brings in Saul. Remember: Saul was the reason these people left Jerusalem in the first place! By this time, though, Saul had obeyed the gospel, so Saul comes in and starts teaching. Verse 26 tells us that the church “*met,*” they “*gathered together,*” as some translations might say. They came together to learn, they came together to pray, they came together for encouragement. They were fulfilling the Great Commission in the last few verses of the book of Matthew, where the Lord told his disciples to teach, baptize, and teach. We study and learn before we obey the gospel, and we also study and learn after we obey the

gospel. We study for a lifetime. These are the basics – prayer, study, and fellowship – but these things will help us to remain true to the Lord as they did in Antioch.

**V. There is something else we find in verse 26, and that is: The disciples in Antioch IDENTIFIED WITH JESUS CHRIST.**

In fact, these people were so focused on Christ, we find at the end of verse 26, that ***“the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.”*** There is a reason for this: When those on the outside looked at this group made up of both Jews and Gentiles, and when they saw that they were basing everything they believed on Jesus Christ, only at this point did it become clear to the world that this was no longer a Jewish movement, this was no longer a Jewish sect. And so at this point it became clear that this group was different from anything they had ever seen before, and so they were given the name ***“Christian.”*** This, by the way, is the first of only three times that the word ***“Christian”*** is ever found in the Bible.

When we say that we are Christians, we are saying that we follow Jesus Christ, we are saying that Christ means everything to us, we believe that Jesus died and came back from the dead, we believe that Jesus is our Savior. We are Christians. The suffix “ian” comes from Latin and means, “belonging to, coming from, being involved in, or being like something.” If I am a disciplinarian, it means that I am all about discipline. If I am a Canadian, it means that I belong to Canada. If I am a vegetarian, it means that my life depends on and revolves around vegetables. If I am a historian, it means that I am all about history. If I am a librarian, that means that I am in some way involved in a library, and on and on. But if I am a Christian, that means that I am all about Jesus Christ. I belong to him. I am like him. I depend on him. Jesus Christ means everything to me. In the same way, the disciples in Antioch were devout followers of Jesus Christ. By looking at those people, it was obvious that they were dedicated to the Lord Jesus. They were identified with Christ.

**VI. There is something else that I believe contributed to the growth of the church in Antioch, and that is: THEY REACHED OUT TO HELP THOSE IN NEED.**

In verse 28, we find that a prophet named Agabus indicates that a great famine was right around the corner. In fact, we know from secular history that there was a famine during the reign of Claudius. Due to several years of bad harvests between the years of 45 and 48 AD, the famine was widespread. But we notice here that the Christians in Antioch were proactive. They did not wait to hear reports of starvation coming in, but they took up a collection ahead of time. They were not commanded to give a certain percentage, this was not a tax, but it was a personal decision ***“in the proportion that any of the disciples had means.”*** In other words, some gave more, some gave less, and the purpose of the collection was ***“for the relief of the brethren living in Judea.”*** We are certainly reminded of 1 John 3:17-18, ***“But whoever has the world’s goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth.”*** They then sent this collection with two well-known brothers who then delivered it to the elders in Jerusalem.

I don’t know whether we can ever really appreciate what happened here. Remember: For hundreds of years, the Jews had this built-up hatred for the Gentiles, but now this new Gentile congregation is sending funds back to the primarily Jewish congregation in Jerusalem. What an impact that gift would have had! But the point is: The Christians in Antioch reached out and helped others as they had the opportunity.

## Conclusion:

As we close our thoughts on this passage, I hope we come away with the understanding that God told us about the church in Antioch for a reason. And the reason is: The church in Antioch is a pattern. The church there serves as a blueprint for our congregation. You see, as Christians, as followers of Christ, when we set out to establish a congregation, when we set out to worship God, we have to realize that God has given us a pattern. God has given us some instructions. And one way God teaches is through inspired examples. Through the church in Antioch, we have an inspired example of what God wants to see in a congregation. God is not looking for what many people today look for in a church. He is not looking for multi-million dollar buildings. He is not looking for the smooth public speaker. He is not looking for the latest and greatest in video production. He is not looking for laser light shows and smoke machines and so much of what many of you have seen in various man-made denominations. Instead, what God is looking for is very simple. He spells it out for us. He gives us examples. And in the example we have studied this morning, it doesn't get much more basic than this, does it?

- He wants us to stand strong against outside pressure.
- He wants us to talk about Jesus at every opportunity.
- He wants us to display grace to the world around us, to let the world see the change that takes place when we obey the gospel.
- He wants us to remain true to the Lord through prayer, Bible study, and fellowship.
- He wants us to identify with Christ in everything we do.
- And he wants us to reach out and help others.

I don't know about you, but I am glad that God's plan is simple! As we close, I would point out a little phrase we skipped earlier. Back up in verse 21, the Bible says that, **"...the hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord."** God saw what was going on in Antioch, and many people were being saved. God's hand was in this, and the congregation grew in strength and in number. The congregation "went viral," so to speak. From secular history, we are told that by the time of the Nicean Council in 325 AD, there were more than 200,000 Christians in the city of Antioch, nearly a quarter of the population of the entire city, nearly the population of the entire city of Madison today. The hand of the Lord was with them.

These are things that we can still do today. God can still use a church like the church in Antioch. We can do every single one of these things this week right here in Madison. We can go out the doors of this building, and we can be Jesus to somebody today.

If you have something we need to pray about as a congregation, we would invite you to write it down, bring it to the front in just a moment, and we would be happy to pray about it. On the other hand, maybe you are not yet a Christian. All we have to offer as a congregation is the gospel. The gospel is the good news that Jesus, the Son of God, came to this earth and lived a perfect life. He died on the cross for our sins, he was buried, but on the third day he was raised up from the dead. We obey the gospel by turning away from sin and by allowing ourselves to be buried in water for the forgiveness of our sins. If you have any questions, we would love to talk with you, but if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know by coming to the front as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: [foullakeschurch@gmail.com](mailto:foullakeschurch@gmail.com)